

Drones over Yemen: Weighing Military Benefits and Political Costs

W. Andrew Terrill

The future role of US drones has been the subject of considerable controversy due to their use in remote parts of the world to target individuals designated as terrorists. In his confirmation hearings, Secretary of State John Kerry expressed concerns about overseas perceptions of such activities by stating that, “American foreign policy is not defined by drones and deployments alone.”¹ Additionally, within the United States, many issues surrounding drone use clearly need scrupulous legal and ethical consideration. Underlying all these factors, however, must be a consideration of the issue of military effectiveness. Regulating the use of a marginally valuable weapons-system is easy, while regulating a highly effective system in a way that forecloses options can be difficult since more is at stake. Careful consideration must be given to how effectively these systems can serve US interests as well as the negative consequences of overseas backlash to their use when evaluating their optimal place in US strategy.

In the case of Yemen, drones are not popular with the local population, but they do appear to have been stunningly successful in achieving goals that support the United States and Yemeni national interests by helping to defeat the radical group al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This organization is one of the most successful affiliates of the original al Qaeda group led by Osama bin Laden until his death in 2011. AQAP became prominent in the early 2000s when it began terrorist operations in Saudi Arabia, though it was ultimately defeated in that country. Following this defeat, AQAP retained its name and regrouped in Yemen, merging with the local al Qaeda organization operating there in 2009. AQAP (which Yemenis simply call al Qaeda) has a recent history of challenging the Yemeni government as well as a long record of attempting to execute spectacular terrorist events in the United States. This agenda has made it vital for the United States to oppose AQAP and help the Yemeni government in a variety of ways, including drone use, when appropriate.

Clearly fearing a domestic backlash, former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who remained in office until early 2012, consistently denied his government was allowing the United States to conduct drone operations over Yemen. Saleh’s denials regarding drones could hardly be considered credible since some extremely high profile strikes occurred while he was president. Of special importance was a successful February 2002 missile attack on six senior al Qaeda terrorists in Yemen. The Saleh government originally claimed these individuals were killed in a Yemeni

¹ John T. Bennett, “U.S. Secretary of State Nominee Pushes Diplomacy Over Force,” *Defense News*, January 28, 2013.

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Air Force bombing attack, but this story unraveled after a senior US official revealed information about the drone strike during a CNN interview.²

In response to domestic pressure created by the CNN disclosure, Saleh eventually acknowledged that the February 2002 strike was conducted by a US drone, but he did not admit to any later strikes by the time he left power ten years later.³ The president's continuing denials were almost universally disbelieved as there had been numerous Yemeni and international news reports of US drone warfare against AQAP, often citing seemingly credible sources on background. These press reports included a discussion of a fatal September 2011 US drone attack on AQAP planner Anwar al Awlaki. In response to such information, Saleh went so far as to claim that Yemeni forces had killed Awlaki, although virtually no one took such statements seriously.⁴ In sharp contrast to Saleh, current Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Hadi has spoken glowingly of US drones used in Yemen, describing them as an effective way to strike the enemy while minimizing collateral damage to innocent civilians through precision strikes.⁵ Despite Hadi's assurances, drone use remains a hotly contested domestic issue in Yemen.

Achievements in Yemen Enabled by Drones

The history of US drone activity in Yemen is still subject to considerable secrecy and cannot be written in full until more information has been declassified and released. Nevertheless, there are a number of known examples where drones appear to have made a significant difference in helping the Yemeni government cope with AQAP while reducing that organization's ability to conduct international terrorism. Two of these instances are especially compelling and deserve special consideration. They are:

- (1) the September 2011 death of terrorist leader Anwar al Awlaki, and
- (2) the use of drones to support Yemen's May-June 2012 offensive against AQAP insurgents and members of the AQAP insurgent organization, Ansar al Shariah, which by early 2012 had seized power in a number of southern Yemeni towns and cities.⁶

The death of Awlaki in a drone strike is especially informative when considering the value of these systems.⁷ Despite Awlaki's US citizenship,

² This strike occurred before AQAP was founded as a separate organization in its current form. See Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 195-196.

³ Gregory D. Johnsen, "Al-Qa'ida in Yemen's 2008 Campaign," *CTC Sentinel* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center), January 2010, 13.

⁴ Sudarsan Raghavan and Karen De Young, "Despite Death of Awlaki, U.S.-Yemen Relations Remain Strained," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2011.

⁵ Greg Miller, "In interview, Yemeni president acknowledges approving U.S. drone strikes," *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2012.

⁶ For a key example of AQAP directing actions by Ansar al-Shariah see "Militants free 73 captured Yemeni troops," *Gulf Times*, April 30, 2012.

⁷ Awlaki's death is almost universally treated as the result of a drone strike throughout the media, and no credible alternative explanation has been proposed. Nevertheless, while President Obama has stated that Awlaki's death was a "major blow" to AQAP, his administration has never formally stated that the United States eliminated him or that it used a drone to do so. Many observers attribute this approach to a U.S. willingness to support Saleh's policies on secrecy. See "Remarks by the President at the 'Change of Office' Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Ceremony," September 30, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

President Obama was reported by *Newsweek* to have considered him a higher priority for capture or elimination than Ayman al Zawahiri, bin Laden's replacement as the leader of "al Qaeda central."⁸ Federal prosecutors, in a case involving an alleged Awlaki associate, maintain that he was the mastermind behind a variety of terrorist activities including the 2009 "Christmas bomber" plot.⁹ In this effort, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a terrorist operative and Awlaki "student" attempted to demolish a Detroit-bound passenger jet that left Amsterdam with 280 people aboard. This plan failed, and Abdulmutallab was badly burned when a bomb sewn into his underwear did not detonate properly. He was then restrained by airline personnel and arrested when the aircraft landed.¹⁰ This unsuccessful plot appears to have had the diabolical purpose of provoking US leadership to invade Yemen in response to these innocent deaths. Such an intervention with ground troops could have produced catastrophic results. Yemen is a highly nationalistic country of 24 million people and 60 million firearms. Any intervention there could last for years and expand rather than diminish the ranks of AQAP. This disaster was well worth avoiding on both foreign policy and humanitarian grounds.

Another important, but less well-known, series of events relevant to these controversies involves what is believed to be the extensive use of drones to support a critical Yemeni government offensive against AQAP in May-June 2012. At this time, President Hadi unleashed an offensive against AQAP forces which had seized significant territory within several southern provinces and were administering them in what one AQAP leader described as "the Taliban way."¹¹ AQAP had been able to seize these areas due to the disorder in the Yemeni government brought about by a strong popular movement involving huge public demonstrations, against the regime of President Saleh. This movement was inspired by the "Arab Spring" revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, but unlike those countries, the old regime in Yemen took more than a year to fall. When President Saleh did resign after 33 years in power, Yemen was left with a number of challenges resulting from government paralysis during the grinding effort to remove him. In addition, the military was deeply divided between pro-Saleh and anti-Saleh factions that had, on occasion, skirmished with each other and inflicted some casualties during the last year of the Saleh regime.¹²

While military fragmentation was deep in the army, the situation in the air force had an additional complication. Large elements of this service were conducting a labor strike when President Hadi entered office due to severe problems with their pay. In Yemen, military pay passes through the hands of senior officers before it reaches service-members and is sometimes skimmed. Strikers claimed that former

⁸ Daniel Klaidman, "Drones: The Silent Killers," *Newsweek*, June 4 & 11, 2012, 44.

⁹ Jeremy Pelofsky, "Prosecutors say al Qaeda leader Awlaki directed underwear bomber," *Reuters*, February 10, 2012.

¹⁰ Ed White, "Nigerian Underwear bomber gets life in prison," *Associated Press*, February 16, 2012; Jason Ryan, "Underwear Bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab Pleads Guilty," *ABC News*, October 12, 2011.

¹¹ Tahir Haydar, "Al Qaida Amir in Abyan: We Want Taliban Rule," *al-Ray Online* (Kuwait), February 6, 2012 (Arabic) (accessed February 10, 2012).

¹² Sudarsan Raghavan, "Clashes in Yemen Underscore Divisions," *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2012; Sudarsan Raghavan, "Yemeni air force officers protest in sign of coming struggle," *The Washington Post*, February 20 2012.

President Saleh's half-brother, General Mohammed Saleh, the air force commander, had diverted large amounts of their pay to himself and his cronies making it difficult for them to survive.¹³ While Hadi relieved General Saleh from command in March 2012, the general resisted his removal and briefly ordered loyal troops to occupy and close Sanaa International Airport.¹⁴ When Hadi refused to compromise, the erstwhile air force commander backed down and left his position. General Saleh's April departure ended the mutiny, but it is difficult to believe that the air force was up to its full operational capability by the time the offensive began less than a month later.¹⁵ Despite these problems, Hadi was not prepared to wait until the military could be rebuilt before liberating the southern territories controlled by AQAP. The situation in south Yemen was such that he saw a near-term military offensive as urgent.

At the beginning of President Hadi's May offensive he, therefore, had a fractured army and a dysfunctional air force. Army leaders from competing factions were often disinclined to support one another in any way including facilitating the movement of needed supplies. Conversely, the air force labor strike had been a major setback to the efficiency of the organization, which was only beginning to operate as normal in May 2012. Even before the mutiny, the Yemen Air Force had only limited capabilities to conduct ongoing combat operations, and it did not have much experience providing close air support to advancing troops. Hadi attempted to make up for the deficiencies of his attacking force by obtaining aid from Saudi Arabia to hire a number of tribal militia fighters to support the regular military. These types of fighters have been effective in previous examples of Yemeni combat, but they could also melt away in the face of military setbacks.

Adding to his problems, President Hadi had only recently taken office after a long and painful set of international and domestic negotiations to end the 33-year rule of President Saleh. If the Yemeni military was allowed to be defeated in the confrontation with AQAP, that outcome could have led to the collapse of the Yemeni reform government and the emergence of anarchy throughout the country. Under these circumstances, Hadi needed every military edge that he could obtain, and drones would have been a valuable asset to aid his forces as they moved into combat. As planning for the campaign moved forward, it was clear that AQAP was not going to be driven from its southern strongholds easily. The fighting against AQAP forces was expected to be intense, and Yemeni officers indicated that they respected the fighting ability of their enemies.¹⁶

Shortly before the ground offensive, drones were widely reported in the US and international media as helping to enable the Yemeni

¹³ Sudarsan Raghavan, "Yemeni air force officers protest in sign of coming struggle," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2012; Hakun Akmasmari and Margaret Coker, "Al-Qaeda Militants Escapes Strike," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 2012.

¹⁴ Ali Saeed, "Dismissed general al-Ahmar finally leaves office," *Yemen Times*, April 26, 2012.

¹⁵ Ahmed al-Haj, "Yemen air force ends mutiny on vow to oust chief," *The Daily Star*, April 19, 2012.

¹⁶ "Al-Qaeda in Yemen on the run as military regains control over 2 of its strongholds," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2012.

government victory which eventually resulted from this campaign.¹⁷ Such support would have included providing intelligence to combatant forces and eliminating key leaders and groups of individuals prior to and then during the battles for southern towns and cities. In one particularly important incident, Fahd al Qusa, who may have been functioning as an AQAP field commander, was killed by a missile when he stepped out of his vehicle to consult with another AQAP leader in southern Shabwa province.¹⁸ It is also likely that drones were used against AQAP fighters preparing to ambush or attack government forces in the offensive.¹⁹ Consequently, drone warfare appears to have played a significant role in winning the campaign, which ended when the last AQAP-controlled towns were recaptured in June, revealing a shocking story of the abuse of the population while it was under occupation.²⁰ Later, on October 11, 2012, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta noted that drones played a “vital role” in government victories over AQAP in Yemen, although he did not offer specifics.²¹ AQAP, for its part, remained a serious threat and conducted a number of deadly actions against the government, although it no longer ruled any urban centers in the south.

The Political Cost of Using Drones in Yemen

Despite their successes, the use of US drones is deeply unpopular with many Yemenis, and anger over their employment is one of the primary drawbacks to using these systems. One of the most important reasons for Yemeni anger is a concern about national sovereignty. There is clear psychological pressure on Yemenis in areas where drones routinely operate, and considerable resentment that a foreign power is able to target and kill individual Yemeni citizens. Some Yemenis claim to see or hear drones at least once a week in what can clearly be a psychologically chilling process.²² Additionally, in areas where AQAP may be present, people often fear gathering in large groups such as wedding parties due to concern that the group will be mistaken for an AQAP assembly.²³ A further complication is that relatives of those killed in Yemen’s highly tribalized society usually consider their kin to be “innocent” or at least not deserving of death from the skies even if they are members of AQAP.²⁴ A more exasperating problem is a bizarre conspiracy theory popular with ultra-conservative Yemeni tribesmen that suggests drones are taking pictures of their wives and daughters, a deeply offensive act within Yemeni culture.²⁵

17 See for example, Ken Dilanian and David S Cloud, “Yemen Sees Rise in U.S. Strikes,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2012; “U.S. drone strike kills 7 al-Qaeda members in Yemen,” *USA Today*, April 14, 2012.

18 At this time Fahd al Qusa was believed to be the third highest ranking member of AQAP. Eric Schmitt, “Militant tied to Ship Bombing is Said to be Killed,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2012.

19 Adam Baron, “Drone Use Surges in Yemen, the frontline against, al Qaeda,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 28, 2012.

20 “Amnesty slams Yemen military, al Qaeda for rights abuse,” *Reuters*, December 4, 2012.

21 “Secretary Panetta Interview with ABC News Jake Tapper,” quoted in *U.S. Department of Defense, News Transcript*, May 27, 2012.

22 “Yemen and the United States: Don’t Drone On,” *Economist*, September 1, 2012, 51.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Iona Craig, “Tribesmen in Angry Protest over Drone Strike Campaign,” *London Times*, January 5, 2013.

25 “Yemen and the United States,” 51.

In a challenge to the sovereignty argument, President Hadi has strongly asserted that he makes the final decision on any drone strike that occurs within Yemeni borders, but it is not certain how many Yemenis actually believe him after Saleh's long history of prevaricating on this topic.²⁶ According to Hadi, US drone attacks on Yemeni targets are not allowed unless he first approves such strikes. The Yemeni president has, therefore, taken responsibility for the strikes while asserting that he does not allow the interests of the United States to supersede Yemeni interests. If a drone strike is not in the interests of Yemen, he refuses to authorize it.

Another reason for Yemeni anger is the widespread belief that drones produce a great deal of collateral damage and that many innocent people have been killed by these systems. Some innocents have clearly been killed, but US leaders including Senator Dianne Feinstein, Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, have indicated that in recent years civilian death figures for each country where the United States operates drones are "in the single digits."²⁷ Systemic problems do, however, exist since it is sometimes difficult to discern AQAP operatives from other individuals simply on the basis of overflights. This issue is particularly problematic since many Yemeni civilians who have nothing to do with AQAP are armed, and some tribal forces have access to crew-served weapons including machine guns and mortars. The obvious way to address this problem is through reliable all-source intelligence which allows the drone operator to discern which targets are innocent and which are AQAP-affiliated. Nevertheless, intelligence is not always conclusive, and mistakes can be made.²⁸ Consequently, extra care is always needed in these circumstances even if some targeting opportunities are lost.

In responding to concerns about collateral damage, President Hadi has admitted that some drone strikes have accidentally killed innocent people, but he has also claimed that Yemen and the United States have taken "multiple measures to avoid mistakes of the past."²⁹ Hadi has further stated that using drones helps ensure that only proper targets are hit and collateral damage is correspondingly minimized. According to Hadi, "[t]he drone technologically is more advanced than the human brain," suggesting that these systems are more accurate than manned combat aircraft.³⁰ He also stated Yemen's air force cannot bomb accurately at night, but US drones do not have any problems doing so.³¹ Hadi thereby asserted that the drones were a better system for avoiding mistakes that could lead to innocent people being killed. These advantages are especially clear when compared with the dangers of using the aging Yemen military aircraft in similar circumstances due to its limited ground target identification capabilities as well as the difficulties for any air force in the developing world to use conventional bombing for precision strikes. Nevertheless, even if President Hadi's assurances on drones are widely accepted, they could easily be undermined by one

26 Miller, *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2012.

27 Mark Mazzetti and Scott Shane, "Drones are Focus as CIA Nominee Goes Before Senators," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2013.

28 Gregory D. Johnson, *The Last Refuge, Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 265.

29 Miller, *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2012.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

highly publicized mistake in which innocent civilians die. In this regard, Hadi is not a dictator, and his ability to maintain an unpopular policy would probably evaporate.

Conclusion

In considering the examples described in this article, it is clear that drones have played an important role in preventing the emergence of an AQAP state in southern Yemen and heading off a spectacular terrorist strike, either of which could create intense US domestic pressure for a risky and expensive military intervention in Yemen. Under these circumstances, drone use seems like an option that should be kept open, at least for the near term. Nevertheless, US leaders cannot become complacent. Yemeni domestic politics are volatile, and President Hadi does not have the political power to ignore this volatility. The Yemeni public's distrust of drones and the potential for serious backlash over any drone-related disaster suggests that it is unwise to assume that the drone option will always be present to meet future national security requirements.

US leadership correspondingly needs to avoid viewing its drone program as a panacea for Yemen's terrorism and insurgency problems. The longer term solution for Yemen would be a reformed military that can address problems, such as the AQAP threat, without the need for direct US military intervention including the use of armed drones. It is of tremendous importance that the United States avoids civilian casualties resulting from drone strikes. This priority is not simply a humanitarian concern since such a disaster could cause the Yemeni government to curtail or end the drone program. Moreover, engaging in such strikes without Yemeni government permission is not an option since the United States is attempting to support the Hadi government and not undermine it.

In sum, drones are on probation with the Yemeni public, and even a friendly Yemeni president can still be pressured to disallow drone strikes. Drones can help manage instability but they cannot, by themselves, create stability in Yemen. Under these circumstances, the United States must move aggressively to help Yemen with a wide range of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism measures and also treat the moderation and professionalization of the Yemeni military as serious priorities. Drones, for all their value, cannot replace a legitimate government with a competent military in ensuring the national security of a strategically important country such as Yemen.

